

PARENTS GET TOGETHER TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER: Group helps parents of teens cope

By Dawn Frasier

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The conversation moved from subject to subject: the crisis in the RUSD, the current presidential primaries, a new administrator at Berkeley High. But afterward, gathered around the living room, the conversation narrowed in focus.

The topic was teenage children. The participants were all parents and step-parents, sharing what was going on in their kids' lives and in their own relationships with them.

The parents of a junior high daughter raised the subject of makeup: when to allow it, how much, whether school is the appropriate place for it. Another dad asked why the wearing of makeup can cause such a problem for a family, at the same time relating the story of when his own daughter got ready to go to school and came out dressed as though she were going to a fancy party.

Homework was a big topic for the evening. One mother, who teaches study skills courses to college students, was disturbed that her children's schools don't seem to be offering any similar help to those students, even giving them assignments without teaching them how to do them. She'd recently found her daughter trying to write a term paper with no clue as to what a thesis statement is or how to direct her thoughts toward a central, controlling topic. "How are the schools teaching them to prepare?" she wondered.

Another mom talked of the stress her sons were under with unfinished school assignments, one of which has a direct correlation with college acceptance. The situation was leading to tension at home, particularly between the boys themselves.

And another, who has been active in helping her daughter in one subject, feels like a loss in others. "How can you help your kids when they're so far beyond you?"

The group resulted from a single three-session course in 'Surviving Adolescence.'

Some practical advice and suggestions were shared, as well as ideas for the larger issues concerned. One suggestion was something all the parents would like to see: a formal program offered by schools to keep parents in touch with exactly what their children are learning and how to help.

The group has been meeting together for over three years now. It resulted from a single three-session course in "Surviving Adolescence".

Dr. Peter Haiman offers regular adult education courses in both the parenting of teenagers and the parenting of pre-school children. A psychotherapist with an adult practice, Haiman has had an interest in the well-being of young children and adolescents for over 30 years.

He earned his doctorate in educational psychology in 1970, having already done work with adolescents on probation from juvenile court and with their families. Hired by schools, Haiman's job was to help kids who hated school get involved. In this case, he found two subjects of interest to them, hot rods and street gangs, and helped them design their own curriculum. They read books and discussed a number of issues, including morality in the context of the street gang discussion.

Confirmed for Haiman at that time was the realization that adolescents' problems had started a long time before. So he's continued his interest in them and particularly in parents who have many questions about rearing a teenaged child.

In his class, he does give some developmental information that might be of use. But he then switches gears to discussion of the specific questions on child rearing that brought the parents to the class in the first place.

"They might be there wanting some specific answers," he said.

After the closing session in the class he offered three summers ago, he noticed that a group of parents who'd taken the course was still milling around, not going home despite the lateness of the hour. They approached him and asked if he'd continue to meet with them and continue the parenting discussions.

He was enthusiastic. "I've worked with parents now for 30 years," Haiman said. "I know how hard it is. I'm also much in favor of parental support groups, and the hard part is getting people to begin. Once people commit themselves, the battles won."

Haiman strongly believes that the loss of the extended family in this country, with its role in child rearing, has made such groups necessary for vital parent support. "Both the adults and the children are paying the price for not having the extended family around," he said.

So he agreed to join in, and the group has now been meeting monthly for over three years.

"It's been a real support group for all to us," said member Maureen Sandidge. "I think a lot of us have things happening with our kids. Even if what they're doing is normal, it doesn't make it any easier. What does make it easier is knowing you're not in it alone."

Having other parents and a "real professional" to discuss things over with helps give a parent a different perspective, she said. "You do get a different perspective on things from people's parenting styles," she explained. "And Peter is very much the teenager's advocate. We have very normal kids making their parents a little bit crazy. But the parents have this time together to look forward to so they can discuss things with the group and with Peter."

Sandidge believes that one major question for parents is "how much we should back off from the kids" in things like room cleaning, for example, in order to "concentrate on the more important things".

And a lot of it, she says, "is just letting go".

The group doesn't just discuss crises, but Maureen's husband, Steve Baczewski, admits that they've had their share of family crises. "When we came to the group," he said, "we came up with productive alternatives on how to deal with it."

Member Edy Chan says, "As each of us comes to our wit's end, you come to the group. It's like a family meeting: 'Have you tried this or that?' The group allows for some space to really think things through creatively and supportively.

"We haven't looked at it from every angle. We're in the thick of it."

Crises, she says, have their own rhythm. "Everyone has a turn."

Arlene Dunn explains that when they took the class, the parents came to realize they needed support systems. "They're all dealing with the same issues, going through the same thing."

Haiman compares some of the stresses of parenting to a pressure cooker. Expressing what's inside is like letting off steam. The pressure is then replaced with both understanding and common sense. "That's what everyone here does for each other," he said.

For Dr. Peter Haiman, the problems facing adolescents today are not only very real but very frightening. He points to a number of statistics cited in the September, 1991 issue of *Contemporary Pediatrics* as illustrative of that fact, while noting that many of them are not made readily available to the general public.

Among the more disturbing statistics, he said, are the following: in the past 40 years, adolescent suicides have quadrupled. The number of suicides may actually be higher, since many reported "accidents" may actually be suicides. This might especially be true in car deaths, for example. With car accidents a leading cause of death for teenagers, at least 35 to 40 percent are single car accidents. Many, he believes, are actually suicides.

"There are an enormous number of adolescents who are depressed," he said. "Anger can be turned outward, resulting in violence, or inward, directed against the self in depression or suicide."

Recently released results of a national adolescent student health survey indicated that 40 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys in the 8th and 10th grades reported having had thoughts of suicide, while 18 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys had made at least one attempt to follow through.

The rise in violence correlates with what Haiman says about anger.

In the U.S., homicide is the second cause of death for all teens. And since 1975, murders committed by juveniles have increased three times.

One of every 20 persons arrested for a violent crime is less than 15 years old, he added. (Many of these statistics are related to gang activities.) Another sad statistic is that, according to the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, 47 percent of the victims of domestic maltreatment are adolescents. Teens are more likely than young children to be beaten by another family member or to be attacked with a gun or a knife. Of course runaways often result.

Haiman has a few ideas on how to ease the pressure on teenagers. Better parenting is, of course, primary. Mutual support systems and bringing parenting education into the classroom ought to be much higher in priority in our society, he believes.

And some modern strategies of education may be causing a great deal of harm, according to Haiman.

"I'm pretty sure we're not giving children and adolescents meaningful lives," he said. "We stick them in school, have them memorize facts and sit in desks away from society."

What Haiman advocates is a return to the apprenticeship program, once a normal part of society. "It was one of the most meaningful aspects of society," he said. Things like reading and writing skills would be learned in the context of what the apprentices were really doing. "Kids would do adult things along with real adults, tied into real life. In so doing, they came under the influence of those adults, even forming friendships with them." Such relationships, he explains, enhanced and enlarged the students' ties with the adult world beyond that provided by their parents.

"Now kids don't have the opportunity to build ties with adults other than their parents," he said. "Instead they build angry ties with their peers. Society treats them like children, meaninglessly." Because of this, said Haiman, adolescents turn to destructive power. "There's no avenue for constructive power."

“We need to bring back the apprenticeship system,” he believes. But in the meantime, he loves to bring parents together and hopes that they'll continue on in supportive groups, whether or not they have anything else in common than a desire to do their best in rearing their children.

“If you're getting something you really need, it overrides other considerations,” he said, adding, “I love doing this.”